

### **Question: Where does the idea for the Christmas crèche or nativity scene come from?**

**Answer:** The story of Jesus' birth is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. During the formation of the early Church, there was a long tradition of honoring Christ's birth in special ways. For example, a basilica was built in Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century emulating the cave of Bethlehem. Depictions of the Christmas scene have also been found on ancient sarcophagi. It was not until Francis of Assisi came along in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the historic night in Bethlehem was first re-created with real actors and props.

With Francis' special insight and understanding of the gospels, the re-creation of the Christmas scene became a literal affair. Francis is well known for his passionate literal understanding of the Bible and the gospel narratives in particular. We know through reading Francis' life according to his biographers that he was particularly moved by the gospel depiction of the infant Christ as a child both vulnerable and without a proper place to stay. The themes of simplicity and meekness, both of which Christ lived by, resonated strongly and were reflected fully in the life of Francis. It was therefore Francis' goal to re-create some of the most vulnerable and simple moments in Jesus' life. One of those scenes was his birth. Thomas of Celano who wrote an extensive biography on Francis gives a detailed account of his life and states that, "Francis' highest intention, his chief desire, his uppermost purpose was to observe the holy Gospel in all things and through all things." (Omnibus I, 299)

About fifteen days before Christmas, Francis sent for a friend whom he knew to be very pious and holy. Francis asked that he go and prepare for a celebration of Christ's birth according to his wishes. Francis made it clear that the goal of the celebration was to re-create the scene of the nativity and emphasize the vulnerability and helplessness of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. He wanted to set before the eyes of those who would attend, "the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he lay upon the hay where he had been placed." (Omnibus I, 300) When Francis arrived in Greccio (the town where this was to take place) he found himself in a new Bethlehem and felt that all who participated in the scene had been taken back to the time of Christ's birth. Francis felt that he was honoring the simplicity, poverty, and humility of that historic and momentous night in which Christ was born.

The experience turned out to be a moving one for all. Those that attended the Mass were filled with joy at what they saw. Francis' biographer, who may also have witnessed the event himself, wrote that all those who were there sang with joy to the Lord, "The woods rang with the voices of the crowd and the rocks made answer to their jubilation." (Omnibus I, 300) Francis himself was deeply moved by the re-creation of the entire nativity scene. He stood before the manger where the infant Jesus would have laid and began to utter sighs, because of the humility the Son of God came into this world with.

At the Christmas Eve Mass in front of the manger, Francis served as deacon and spoke regarding the nativity of the poor and helpless Jesus. Francis spoke at the Mass with, "a strong voice, a sweet voice, a clear voice, a sonorous voice." (Omnibus I, 301) Celano writes that God's presence at this joyous re-creation was truly felt and witnessed by many who attended. Many miracles are accounted to have taken place that night in Greccio. One man who took part in the service saw in the manger a vision of the Child Jesus.

Until Francis' reenactment, the traditions of the Church had nearly forgotten the importance of celebrating the vulnerability of Christ as a child. After this most blessed event, the hay that had been placed in the manger was kept and distributed to beasts of burden and other animals. Celano states that those animals that ate the hay were cured of various illnesses or ailments that they suffered from. The hay also had the power to cure women who were having problems giving birth. Like the many animals that were cured, those men and women who were suffering from various ailments also obtained health by coming into contact with the hay. (Omnibus I, 302)

By recreating that historic night in Bethlehem, Francis globally renewed appreciation for the Holy Family and in particular the difficulties that they had faced. All who took part in the Mass at Greccio were deeply moved and spread word of their experience to others. Many new traditions sprang from Francis' actions on that night. By reenacting the birth of Christ, Francis popularized a practice that previous to his actions was not widespread: building Christmas crèches and witnessing the poorness of Jesus. The Mass on that historic Christmas Eve also brought with it singing rejoices in celebration of Christ's birth. This perhaps is the first account and likely the beginning of singing songs in relation to Christmas, thus the first Christmas carols were sung on that night. (*Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life*, Cunningham)